Interreligious Dialogue: the grey areas.

Sir, Those of us whose academic calling is at the borders of religions yo-yo between hope and despair. Roman Catholics and Hindus who are quietly forging academic spaces yet untrod have to reconcile to the following facts:

a) Often those engaging in dialogue are misunderstood within their own religions. Hindus might think me covertly batting for Christianity. Roman Catholics have to hear unkind words from their own; "what is the point in talking to Hindus"? It is from within this deep fear of losing ourselves and yet keep listening to the perceived Other, there arises a kind of unsettling peace which borders on hopelessness. There are no immediate tangible rewards since in real life there remains too much toxicity.

b) Persons engaged in dialogue may be perceived by members of the other religion as being potential religious crossovers. So often Hindus will look at learned Christians and think whether the Christian Hindu- theologian is a potential Hindu. Holy Roman Catholic men and women might see a Hindu Christian-theologian as a potential Christian. This causes misunderstandings and an atmosphere of suspicion.

c) How do we interpret the others' texts? When I read Lamentations, I remember Kathleen O'Connors' interpretation of the text as one championing "the Missing Voice", that is of God's --- leading to "God's frightening silence...resonant with interpretive possibility" (Lamentations and the Tears of the World, p.86). How do I react to this 'interpretive possibility'? Is it fine if I superimpose my religion's understanding of 'karman' here through a sleight of hand, using Giorgio Agamben's book Karman? Is it even fair to read a key Biblical text in this manner? Is it fair to read the Mahanirvana Tantra, the other Tantras and Agamas from Roman Catholic viewpoints? Ironically, can a Hindu or a Roman Catholic ever read any text ever without the natural biases of being a historically contingent being? I cannot cease to be a Hindu while studying Patristics. Roman Catholics cannot cease to be Roman Catholics while reading the commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita.

d) Yet as the Irish song says --- the dance must go on. The temptation for me is to interpret the Lord of the Dance, as being Nataraja. Dance, dance, wherever you are --- this a Christian song and the Lord of the Dance is here, certainly, Jesus Christ. It is another matter that the senior-most Christian Brother in India today, Br. Maurice Baptist Finn cfc and I converse through the long winter days --- he at Goa, I at Kolkata. and reflect on the Dance started long ago by him, his confrères Bro. Robert Cataldus Whiting cfc and Br. Justin Harrison cfc and how they invited me to the dance in the early 1990s. He in turn writes to me, on my prodding, about his Dance started at Ireland. Bro. Finn cfc and I feel we have picked up from the early 1990s and we chat. Interfaith dialogue has brought us together. He encourages me in my low days to carry the dance on when I am at Tarapith's 'shamshan'. He had freely received, freely he gives in spite of the burden of his years. We try to understand and enrich each other.

e) In my recent engagement with the Christian Brothers, in person and online, I see ways of forming a community of men decades hence since my 'marga' is closed to outsiders. Forget Christians, Hindus do not know of this path --- we are just 35/40 in the entire of India. We have much to learn from smaller tight-knit congregations. The Christian Brothers are now more open, more at home, more willing to listen to their Founder, Blessed Edmund Rice than they were 30/35 years ago --- now they provide me a framework for community building since we have both celibates and men in families like yours truly. The joys of interreligious dialogue are not always more than the joys of being at home, cocooned in our comfort zones. Yet can we afford to not enter into dialogue? If we do not engage in dialogue, "then we die" according to the nonagenarian Bro. Finn cfc.

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